

*Lord God, thank you for Isaiah’s vision of the messianic rule. May it help us to know Christ better and give us a yearning to be more like him. Form our hearts and lives so that our living reflects your righteousness and love. Amen.*

Woody Allen once quipped that the day may well come when the lion will lie down with the lamb, but the lamb isn’t going to get much sleep! Allen was being cheeky, but he makes a good point. In the kind of peaceable kingdom that a passage such as Isaiah 11 sketches for us, it will indeed not be enough to create a showcase display window of former foes dwelling next to each other. There will have to be changes on the inside, at the fundamental level of the hearts of all creatures involved. The lamb needs to be able to go to sleep secure in the knowledge that the lion has lost all appetite for anything served with a side of mint jelly. The parents of the toddler playing by the snake’s lair need to know not just that the snake is behaving itself so long as someone is there to keep an eye on it but that things have changed at so basic a level that there really is nothing to worry about whether a parent is watching or not.

So it is with the picture of righteousness and justice as it emerges from Isaiah 11. The poor and the needy must be treated well not just when God is looking or when the spotlight is on a particular situation, but at all times, because all people have so thoroughly fallen in love with—and become enmeshed with—God’s better vision for his creation and its flourishing that the very possibility of abusing the weak will be nonexistent.

In other words, old enemies need to go beyond shaking hands for photo ops. They must wish each other well with every fiber of their being and then live consistently in ways that will also make gracious living more likely to take place. Isaiah 11 envisions the coming of a special ruler for Israel. He will be a “shoot” from “the stump of Jesse,” meaning, he will be a descendant of King David (11:1). This ruler will be endowed with God’s own Spirit, who will supply wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge (11:2). Because of his divine endowment, this king will not judge in the way of other sovereigns. He will go deeper than what ordinarily can be seen or heard. As Isaiah puts it, “*With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth*” (11:4). In the days of this messianic ruler, peace will prevail along with God’s justice: “*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat*” (11:6). Indeed, “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (11:9).

From the earliest days, the followers of Jesus have seen in Isaiah 11 a prophecy concerning Jesus the Messiah. He is the one who sees beyond what is obvious, who can peer into the hearts of people. He is the Ruler who brings God's justice and righteousness. Under his reign, the earth will experience the all-embracing peace of God.

As I reflected on this passage this week, it motivated me to honor Jesus as God's unique Ruler. But it also stirred in me a desire to become more like Jesus in my own life and leadership. I want to be one whose judgment goes beneath the surface. I want to see more than what is apparent to my eyes, to hear more than what I hear with my ears. I want to live based on God's righteousness, God's right order for all relationships. I want to make decisions according to God's justice, not just my personal preference.

How will this happen? How can we become people who embody Isaiah's messianic vision? Knowing our limitations, we realize that this will be possible only with God's help. As we study and meditate upon Scripture, we will come to think as God thinks. Through our fellowship with God's people, we will be sharpened, even as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). And, as we attend to the Spirit of God who dwells within us, we will be guided by God's own wisdom and knowledge. In time, God will form us to be more like him, with our heart conformed to God's own heart. Therefore, we will live in the ways of God, yet always under the supreme authority and acknowledging the supreme wisdom of God.

For all its lyric beauty and familiarity, Isaiah 11 can be both striking and odd. It's striking because of the far-reaching results that we see sketched here on account of God's sending forth a truly righteous Ruler from the stump of Jesse. But it's also odd because it moves so nimbly between what you'd expect to be the main focus (justice for the poor) to something that is less expected but that occupies far more space in these verses (namely, cozying up in the animal kingdom of one-time predators and their prey).

As I mentioned, the first surprise of this passage is the line in verse 3 that the new Ruler will not use his eyes and ears to decide what constitutes justice. We all know justice is supposed to be blind (we can picture that image of Justice wearing a blindfold) but is it to be deaf, too? How would any judge be able to do his or her job if no evidence could be heard or seen? Taken literally, this would not make sense. The next line in verse 4, however, helps us understand: Righteousness itself will be the standard first for the needy and the poor.

These are the two groups that typically get no hearing at all. They are the ones who are trampled upon by the rich and whose causes are seldom heard at the bar of justice. The

rich can buy off judges or hire a raft of lawyers wearing \$1,000 suits which makes it impossible for the needy to come anywhere close to having their cases considered. Of course, these are also precisely the marginalized members of society for whom God has the most concern in Israelite society (at least according to most of the witness of the Old Testament). The poor, the orphaned, the widowed, and the strangers from other lands were supposed to receive so many extra breaks that justice would take care of itself. That, however, did not generally happen. In books like Isaiah, the context of judgment makes it clear that Israel's number one failing was precisely in its treatment of those down and out on the margins of life.

But the new Ruler of whom Isaiah speaks (a Branch that bears fruit) will have such a firm hold of Righteousness that he won't need to see or hear the details of any given case. All that will need to happen is that the poor and needy will be brought forward, will be brought into close proximity of the standard that is simply Righteousness himself, and then it will be plain to everyone else with eyes to see what needs to happen: the poor and needy must be taken care of. It's a no-brainer. Once you see a poor person standing next to the measuring rod of Righteousness, what needs to happen next will be obvious. No one will doubt that something must be done and no one will question what needs to be done. As I once heard someone say, when it comes to taking care of the basic needs of our neighbors, the Bible's instructions are not exactly "rocket science."

We live in an age when the sheer number of opinion makers, idea shapers, and talking heads in the media can (and generally do) make most every problem you can think of sound so complicated and perilous that it really is an open question whether anything can be done to solve problems like poverty, war, racism, and injustice. No matter what anyone says, there is always another "expert" waiting in the wings to come on camera to say, "Well not so fast. It's not as simple as that because we won't have the votes to do thus-and-so..."

If only we could get beneath the surface to see the true standard of Righteousness. If only we could feel the searing stare of the One who embodies all Righteousness. If only we could stack up our supposedly insurmountable problems before the bar of that holy justice. If we could see more clearly, we might not only see that we need to do better, but that what needs doing is not nearly as complex as some people would have us believe.

What comes next, however, is very curious because there is no direct connection in this Scripture that is made between the presence of this new Ruler and the shalom that descends on the non-human creation. Yes, there is direct action hinted at in terms of how the poor and needy are handled but this other stuff about wolves and lambs and leopards

and such seems to just flow naturally *as a result of* the presence of great Righteousness descending to the earth. When all is made well, it really will be the entire creation that will be made well. What we see sketched here in the animal kingdom—and the lack of any form of “harm” throughout God’s holy mountain—is to be our cue for how we treat each other in the human realm, too.

In a scene from the horror film *Aliens*, Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) and her companions discover that one of their colleagues had recently tried to engineer a terrible event in order that he and his company might turn a hefty profit. This man was willing to sacrifice the lives of Ripley and a little girl if that’s what it took to be able to bring back alive one of the nightmare alien creatures they were battling (that, by the way, have a double set of jaws, deadly acid for blood, and go around biting people’s heads off). After discovering her colleague’s attempted betrayal, Ripley at one point says, “You know, I don’t know who is worse: the aliens or us people. At least you never see them betraying each other to make a few extra bucks.”

Indeed, what people do to each other is often far worse—and far more sinister—than what can be witnessed in the animal kingdom. Animals do what they do to survive and mostly out of sheer instinct. People, on the other hand, regularly go against their better nature to destroy fellow image bearers of God, usually so they can get rich quick.

When true Righteousness comes, animals will treat each other very very well. What I wonder is, will people? Isaiah 11 got me thinking about all the ways we try to downsize Christmas and make it neat and tidy and local (that is, whatever suits me). But the coming of God’s Chosen Messiah is so much bigger than we ever imagined. It involves the poor and needy whom we do not usually see attending our churches. It involves the whole realm of nature, which we also conveniently forget about in our more human-focused moments. It’s just so much bigger than all that we try to stuff into it, as though we’re filling a stocking. That’s because it is the coming of Righteousness—and once we recognize that, everything looks different. Everything.

What would help you to see what lies below the surface of Christmas this year? What can all of us do to become more like Jesus in our wisdom, in our understanding, and in our doing?

Messiah has the answer. He came to show us. Amen.